

8. HILL MYNA *GRACULA RELIGIOSA* LINNAEUS
BREEDING IN ARTIFICIAL NESTS IN GARO
HILLS, ASSAM

(With a plate)

The Indian Hill Myna or Grackle (*Gracula religiosa*) is a wary arboreal bird in the wild state in its evergreen-forest habitats in south-west and north-east India. It is widely known for its prowess as a talking bird when in captivity, for it surpasses even the parrots in the accuracy of its imitations. A Hill Myna will learn to talk well only if it has been taken from the nest while young, and since Hill Mynas are wary birds and nest usually in inaccessible holes in trees, the taking of their young is often a difficult problem. The difficulty is reduced in the Garo Hills District of Assam where the Hill Mynas are persuaded to breed in artificial nests. Such a nest consists of a framework of split bamboo about 5 feet long and 1 foot wide at the middle, tapering towards each end (Plate); this is thickly covered on the outside with thatching straw tightly tied down onto the framework. A hole is cut about two-thirds of the way from the slightly thicker lower end of the nest, which is then attached to the branches of a tree at an angle of about 45 degrees, with the hole at the higher end and pointing downwards. The trees chosen are usually tall, and are situated in, or at the edge of, clearings in the forest, or at the edge of a small village; the nests are at or near the tops of the trees. A Garo may have 4 or 5 of these nests, in different trees, and by observation he can tell when there are young birds in the nest. Usually he does not want to run the risk of their fledging and escaping, and so he takes the young from the nest earlier than is desirable, feeds them on a not-very-adequate diet of gram-powder made into large plugs and pushed down the gaping throat, and then sells them at the weekly market or 'hat' at prices usually between Rs. 10 and Rs. 20. Dealers then take them on via Goalpara to Calcutta.

The practice of putting up these artificial nests in the Garo Hills is an old one, certainly much older than the recent huge demand for young mynas for export. It is not done in other parts of India for the catching of Hill Mynas; possibly it arose as a simple way of

catching birds, indiscriminately of species, in order to eat them. As with the hill people of Orissa and Nepal, the Garos also catch the young of Hill Mynas which nest naturally in holes in trees, but the majority of young mynas leaving Assam for a life in captivity have probably been hatched in these artificial basket nests. The advantages to the Garo are obvious: he has a good source of revenue, collected with little difficulty since the nests are obviously accessible; he can observe the nests easily and can take the young before they fledge; and having the nests often near his house he can prevent the young birds from being taken by his neighbour—it is obvious to whom they belong. But what makes the mynas, which usually nest only in tree holes, make use of bamboo-and-grass baskets is very difficult to understand, although there are a great many possible reasons to be examined. But since mynas which nest in these baskets rarely succeed in rearing any young, there must be very strong selection pressure against the habit; perhaps in a couple of decades they will scarcely do so any more. A few thousand young mynas are taken out of Assam each year, largely for export. This represents quite a large drain, but is less serious than it would appear for two reasons: first, that if the young birds are taken from the nest, the parents usually nest again, and second, that the taking of young mynas from Assam is at present largely confined to the Garo Hills District only. Control measures would be easy to apply, but are probably not yet necessary; they may well become necessary if the trade in young mynas continues to expand.

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